

BUSINESS COMPARISON

The BA's Independent Booksellers Forum established BAseline (previously called the Independent Booksellers Forum Fitness Programme) to help independent booksellers benchmark their performance and costs against their peers, with a view to improving business performance. John Keble from Christian Books in Dunstable tells us about his experience of BAseline.



We all measure ourselves at some time in our life. How tall am I? What do I weigh now? We measure because we want to do something about it: maybe go on a diet for health reasons, or get fitter so we can start winning marathons. We all measure ourselves so we can act and change. So, why not in bookselling?

Here at Christian Books Dunstable we saw the opportunity to measure ourselves as a bookshop and joined in with BAseline. In short, we wanted to know how we measured up against other booksellers and what we could change. We joined in 2013 and immediately found the measurement helpful. We were considering what to do with the bookshop and how we could enhance sales, considering the immediate threat of online competition. As a small independent rural bookseller, we did not have many resources but we knew we needed to change.

Using BAseline, we quickly realised we needed to remodel the layout of the bookshop to enhance sales and improve the sales per square metre.

In 2015 we closed the bookshop for two weeks, emptied the entire shop and remodelled it to create an open plan feel. We moved the children's book section from the back corner



of the shop to be front and centre. We realised customers wanted discoverability of books, especially with children's books, and it made sense to place the children's section at the front with a small children's reading table, rug and box of toddler toys. Now people walk past the bookshop and immediately see the children's area through the shop window.

We re-arranged the bookshelves so they cascaded: all the bookshelf headers are now visible through the front window, with the tallest bookshelves at the back of the bookstore. These tallest bookshelves contain our bestselling books so customers have to walk through the bookshop to get to these and discover other books they may not have been considering.

Using BAseline, we changed the way we manage stock to try to improve our book stock turn because we realised we were behind other similar sized bookshops. We also realised that we needed to look at our gross margin: we have managed to improve our total gross margin year by year.

We installed an espresso coffee machine to provide real coffee for customers who travel in from the countryside, giving an opportunity to talk with them whilst they browse. The espresso coffee machine has proved very popular with customers: they often stay longer and purchase more.

Overall, we have found BAseline an excellent tool both to help us improve in areas where we underperformed compared to similar sized bookshops and also to seek ways to change what we do. We thoroughly recommend that all bookshops join the scheme. It does not take too long to complete the survey, but it will help you gain a better understanding of how you measure up and where you need to act.